## XXI. Dr. Macalister

W. Somerset Maugham

He was a fine figure of a man, hard upon sixty, I should think, when I knew him, but hale still and active. He was stout, but his great height enabled him to carry his corpulence with dignity. He had a strong, almost a handsome face, with a hooked nose, bushy white eyebrows and a firm chin. He was dressed in black, and he wore a low collar and a white bow tie. He had the look of an English divine of a past generation. His voice was resonant and hearty, and he laughed boisterously.

His career was somewhat out of the common. He had come to China thirty years before as a medical missionary, but now, though still on good terms with the mission, he was no longer a member. It had been decided, it appears, to build a school on a certain desirable spot which the doctor had hit upon, and in a crowded Chinese city it is never very easy to find building land, but when the mission after much bargaining had eventually bought this the discovery was made that the owner was not the Chinese with whom the negotiations had been conducted, but the doctor himself. Knowing that the school must be built and seeing  that no other piece of land was available he had borrowed money from a Chinese banker and bought it himself. The transaction was not dishonest, but perhaps it was a little unscrupulous and the other members of the mission did not look upon it as the good joke that Dr. Macalister did. They displayed even a certain acrimony, and the result was that Dr. Macalister, though preserving friendly relations with persons with whose aims and interests he was in the fullest sympathy, resigned his position. He was known to be a clever doctor and he soon had a large practice both among the foreigners and the Chinese. He started a hostel in which the traveller, at a price, and a high one, could have board and lodging. His guests complained a little because they were not allowed to drink alcohol, but it was much more comfortable than a Chinese inn, and some allowance had to be made for the doctor’s principles. He was a man of resource. He bought a large piece of land on a hill on the other side of the river and put up bungalows which he sold one by one to the missionaries as summer resorts; and he owned a large store in which he sold everything, from picture postcards and curios to Worcester sauce and knitted jumpers, which a foreigner could possibly want. He made a very good thing out of it. He had a commercial bent.

The tiffin he invited me to was quite an imposing function. He lived above his store in a large apartment overlooking the river. The party consisted of Dr. Macalister and his third wife, a lady  of forty-five in gold-rimmed spectacles and black satin, a missionary spending a few days with the doctor on his way into the interior, and two silent young ladies who had just joined the mission and were busily learning Chinese. On the walls of the dining-room hung a number of congratulatory scrolls which had been presented to my host by Chinese friends and converts on his fiftieth birthday. There was a great deal of food, as there always is in China, and Dr. Macalister did full justice to it. The meal began and ended with a long grace which he said in his deep voice, with an impressive unction.

When we returned to the drawing-room Dr. Macalister, standing in front of the grateful fire, for it can be very cold in China, took a little photograph from the chimney piece and showed it to me.

“Do you know who that is?” he asked.

It was the photograph of a very thin young missionary in a low collar and a white tie, with large melancholy eyes and a look of profound seriousness.

“Nice looking fellow, eh?” boomed the doctor.

“Very,” I answered.

A somewhat priggish young man possibly, but priggishness is a pardonable defect in youth, and here it was certainly counterbalanced by the appealing wistfulness of the expression. It was a fine, a sensitive, and even a beautiful face, and those disconsolate eyes were strangely moving. There was fanaticism there, perhaps, but there  was the courage that would not fear martyrdom; there was a charming idealism; and its youth, its ingenuousness, warmed one’s heart.

“A most attractive face,” I said as I returned the photograph.

Dr. Macalister gave a chuckle.

“That’s what I looked like when I first came out to China,” he said.

It was a photograph of himself.

“No one recognises it,” smiled Mrs. Macalister.

“It was the very image of me,” he said.

He spread out the tails of his black coat and planted himself more firmly in front of the fire.

“I often laugh when I think of my first impressions of China,” he said. “I came out expecting to undergo hardships and privations. My first shock was the steamer with ten-course dinners and first-class accommodation. There wasn’t much hardship in that, but I said to myself: wait till you get to China. Well, at Shanghai I was met by some friends and I stayed in a fine house and was waited on by fine servants and I ate fine food. Shanghai, I said, the plague spot of the East. It’ll be different in the interior. At last I reached here. I was to stay with the head of the mission till my own quarters were ready. He lived in a large compound. He had a very nice house with American furniture in it and I slept in a better bed than I’d ever slept in. He was very fond of his garden and he grew all kinds of vegetables in it. We had salads just like the salads we had in America and fruit, all kinds of fruit;  he kept a cow and we had fresh milk and butter. I thought I’d never eaten so much and so well in my life. You did nothing for yourself. If you wanted a glass of water you called a boy and he brought it to you. It was the beginning of summer when I arrived and they were all packing up to go to the hills. They hadn’t got bungalows then, but they used to spend the summer in a temple. I began to think I shouldn’t have to put up with much privation after all. I had been looking forward to a martyr’s crown. Do you know what I did?”

Dr. Macalister chuckled as he thought of that long passed time.

“The first night I got here, when I was alone in my room, I threw myself on my bed and I just cried like a child.”

Dr. Macalister went on talking, but I could not pay much attention to what he said. I wondered by what steps he had come to be the man I knew now from the man he had been then. That is the story I should like to write.